

RECREATION

INTRODUCTION

The Susitna River Basin is exceptionally well endowed with recreational resources. Its landscapes and ecosystems are as diverse as those found anywhere in the state, ranging from rugged mountains to coastal wetlands. Recreation opportunities in the basin are considerable, enhanced by vast acreages of undisturbed public lands. The basin's proximity to Anchorage results in substantial recreation demands, which, coupled with abundant recreational resources, suggests that the basin will host much of southcentral Alaska's outdoor recreation activity in years to come.

The Willow Sub-basin in particular is the focus of much of the recreation activity of Anchorage and borough residents. It is the most densely populated area of the entire Susitna River basin. The communities of Wasilla and Willow have experienced significant growth in recent years due largely to an ample supply of buildable private lands within convenient travel distance of Anchorage coupled with the area's outstanding recreational potential.

Abundant surface water is the single most important element of the area's recreation potential. Fishing is a major recreation pursuit throughout the sub-basin and is particularly important on the Little Susitna River and Willow Creek. The Nancy Lake System is a year-round recreation area offering fishing, canoeing, cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, and camping.

Waterfront waysides or resorts featuring picknicking, fishing, and water skiing are especially popular in settled areas like Wasilla. The Talkeetna Mountains are host to a full range of mountain based uses, including climbing, hiking, skiing, snow-machining, and wildlife photography. South and west of the Parks Highway are the Pt. MacKenzie, Palmer Hay Flats, and Susitna lowlands areas. Duck and moose hunting are the most extensive recreational activities occurring in these areas.

RECREATION ISSUES

The three most basic recreation issues are the same in the sub-basin as they are in other areas, that is, providing a land base that can support recreational activities and providing the facilities and access that allow people to use these recreational areas. Specific recreation issues within these general categories are listed below.

1. Recreational Land Base

The Willow Sub-basin is likely to experience significant population growth and resource development in the near future. This will result in pressure to use existing and potential recreation land for other uses. Two specific problem areas are discussed below.

- a. Hatcher Pass: conflicts between mining and recreational uses have to be resolved in this primarily state owned area.
- b. River Corridors and Lake Fronts: settlement values in these areas are very high. Use of buffers, public retention and other methods will be required to maintain opportunities for public recreational use of these areas.

2. Access

The combination of heavy use and limited facilities creates congestion, reduces user satisfaction, and causes management problems. This is a special problem during salmon fishing season where few road accessed areas exist to accommodate many users. It is also a year-round problem where a large number of outdoor recreationists congregate in the Hatcher Pass area of the Talkeetna Mountains, but find inadequate parking, staging, and restroom facilities.

A second important access related issue involves ownership. Many recreational activities in the sub-basin, especially hunting and fishing, occur on or across private lands. Increased development on private lands as well as pressure to dispose of public lands can reduce public recreational opportunities and create trespass problems.

3. Coordination to Meet Varied User Needs

The Willow Sub-basin is now and will continue to be an important recreation area for people from Anchorage and other visitors from outside the sub-basin. Additionally, there will be an increasing need for community parks and other recreation facilities for local residents. It is essential to identify the nature of these varied recreational demands and determine the best means to meet them, including the most appropriate and efficient role for state and local agencies and private recreational providers.

A specific example of this issue is campgrounds. Presently the Willow Sub-basin does not have sufficient camping facilities, especially in fishing areas, to meet regional and local needs. Meeting this need will require coordination between the state and borough and knowledge of existing and planned private campgrounds.

Based on the existing availability of recreation land and facilities and an assessment of likely future recreation demands in the Willow Sub-basin, the Alaska Division of Parks has ranked the importance of the following recreation needs:

Critical Needs (needs for which current demand greatly exceeds supply)

- Developed camping units
- Boat launches
- Alpine skiing area
- Stream fishing areas

Important Needs (needs for which demand exceeds supply)

- Picnicking units
- Cross-country ski trails
- Walking, running, cycling trails
- Stream and lake areas for canoeing, rafting, kayaking
- Swimming areas
- Lake fishing sites

Notable Needs (needs for which demand is expected to exceed supply in the near future)

- Dog mushing trails
- Hiking areas
- Snow-machine trails

These rankings are not meant to suggest that one activity is more important or desirable than another, but rather to indicate which activities most lack an adequate land base to meet expected public demand.

Recreation issues and needs identified above are addressed by this plan in two ways. First, the borough and state have developed goals, policies, and management guidelines (Chapter III) which will direct the use of important public recreation lands. Second, the plan designates specific lands to be managed for their public recreation values. These land use designations are presented below.

EXISTING AND POTENTIAL RECREATION AREAS

As part of this plan, many of the most important existing and potential recreation sites within the sub-basin have been identified. These are shown on Map 9. These recreation areas have been divided into four categories and are described below.

1. Major Public Recreation Areas

The major public recreation areas in the sub-basin are the Hatcher Pass/Talkeetna Mountains area (Hatcher Pass Management Unit), the Nancy Lake State Recreation Area, the Little Willow Creek Corridor, the Little Susitna Corridor, and the Iditarod Trail.

The Hatcher Pass Management Unit provides a wide range of summer and winter recreation activities including hiking, mountain climbing, snow-mobiling, skiing, and wildlife photography. (Mining, recreation, fish and wildlife, and grazing all receive primary use designations in the Hatcher Pass Unit.) The Nancy Lake State Recreation Area is a major boating, camping, fishing and winter sports area for southcentral Alaska. The plan does not affect this area or other legislatively designated areas. The Little Willow Creek and Little Susitna River Corridors are anadromous streams which provide important recreation opportunities to people from all over the state. The Iditarod Trail, between Knik and Nome, is the state's best known dog mushing route. (The Susitna Flats and Palmer Hay Flats state game refuges also provide important dispersed hunting and fishing. These areas are discussed in the Fish and Wildlife section of this appendix.)

2. Recreation Areas Larger Than 160 Acres

Map 9 identifies eighteen publicly and privately owned outdoor recreation areas larger than 160 acres within the Willow Sub-basin. These 18 areas and the many sites smaller than 160 acres discussed below encompass approximately 23,000 acres and provide 474 camping units (many double as picnic units), 146 picnic units, and 13 boat launches. Existing facilities serve picnicking, camping, boating, canoeing, and fishing activities. The sites larger than 160 acres are listed below.

Recreation Sites Larger Than 160 Acres

<u>Site Number</u>	<u>Site Name</u>
3	Willow Creek Scenic Area (one)
14	Cow Lake
34	Fish Creek
43	Houston Lakes
48	Meadow Creek
54	Willow Creek Scenic Area (two)
59	Steven's Lake
64	Fry Pan Lake
66	Four Lakes
89	Willow Creek Canyon Scenic Area
90	Bullion Mountain Scenic Area
92	Twelve Mile Lake
93	Willow Creek Island
98	Susitna Scenic Area
104	Little Susitna (Access Site)
113	Barry's Resort (Finger Lake)
116	Lucy Lake/Cottonwood Creek
127	Little Susitna River Corridor

3. Recreation Areas Smaller Than 160 Acres

This category includes over 100 publicly and privately owned trail waysides, campgrounds, historic sites, and lake and stream access points. These sites are indicated through appropriate symbols on Map 9.

4. Recreation and Historic Trails

Work by the Alaska Division of Parks and the Matanuska Susitna Trails Commission identified approximately 400 miles of important trails in the Willow Sub-basin. These trails, some of which have been in use since gold rush days and even earlier, serve hikers, snowmobilers, dogsledders, and cross-country skiers and provide recreational access and other uses throughout the sub-basin. Trails are indicated by dotted line and by number on Map 9.

Recreation and Historic Trails

<u>Trail Number</u>	<u>Trail Name</u>
39	Willow Lake Trail
74	Susitna Flats Trail
81	Deception Creek Trail
87	Willow Creek Mountain Trail
91	Sled Road Trail
128	Susitna Flats Branch Trail
129	Susitna Flats Branch Trail
130	Twin Island Lakes Trail
131	Connecting Trail
132	Yohn Lake to Susitna River Trail
133	Susitna Station Connection
134	Nancy Lake Loop Trails
135	Bench Lake Trail
136	Meadow Lakes Trail
137	Bald Mountain Access Trails
138	Grubstake Gulch Trail
139	Purchases Creek Trail
140	Shorty Creek Trail
141	Canyon Creek Trail
142	Upper Willow Creek Trail
143	Independence Mine Trail
144	Reed Lakes Trail
145	Fern Mine
146	Glacier Creek Trail
147	Little Susitna River Trail
148	Upper Little Susitna River Trail
149	Stevens Lake Connecting Trails
150	Willow Creek Trail
151	Big Lake to Knik Loop Trail
152	Iditarod Trail Connections

In addition to the 4 categories of recreation areas identified above, considerable recreation occurs on public lands which are not specifically designated or managed for recreation. The areas include many of the Willow Sub-basin's lakes, rivers, streams, and mountains. Nearly a thousand miles of undesignated and unprotected trails are used for hunting and fishing access, dogsledding, hiking, snow-machining, and cross-country skiing.

LAND USE DESIGNATIONS

An important part of the implementation of the recreation goals, policies, and guidelines presented in Chapter III is the designation of a land base which will be managed to provide recreation opportunities. All major recreation areas, recreation sites, and trails as shown on Map 9 will be managed for public use. Securing these recreation opportunities will help meet the needs identified above by establishing areas for developed recreation activities such as campgrounds and boat launches and by protecting public access to trails, streams, and wilderness areas. The Hatcher Pass Recreation Area provides a possible site for alpine skiing, one of the "critical needs" cited above.

Important recreation opportunities also exist on public lands which are not designated for recreation as a primary use. Map 4 in Chapter II shows recreation as a secondary use in several units where dispersed hunting, fishing, hiking, and other recreation activities are important values that will be protected as other land uses occur.